OPEN ACCESS Top-Quality Science
Freely available online

Review of Communication Research
2013, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1-30

Synthesizing a Working Definition of "Mass" Media

W. James Potter
University of California at Santa Barbara, CA, USA
wjpotter@comm.ucsb.edu

Highlights

- A clear conceptualization of a focal phenomenon is essential to the development of a scholarly field.
- Scholars have largely ignored the task of constructing a definition of "mass media" or "mass communication."
- The few scholars who have attempted defining these terms have struggled with faulty definitional elements.
- The task of conceptualizing "mass" media has become even more important – and difficult – in the new media environment.
- The cutting edge question: Is it useful to make a distinction between "mass" media and non-"mass" media?
- This review presents an argument for why it is important to make a distinction between "mass" and non-"mass" media.
- A definition of "mass" media is synthesized by using a systematic four step process.
- The definition of "mass" media resulting from this process of synthesis is: The sender is a complex organization that uses standardized practices to disseminate messages while actively promoting itself in order to attract as many audience members as possible, then conditioning those audience members for habitual repeated exposures. Audiences members are widely dispersed geographically, are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing, and encounter messages in a variety of exposure states but most often in a state of automaticity. Channels of message dissemination are technological devices that can make messages public, extend the availability of messages in time and space, and can reach audiences within a relatively short time.
- Because "mass" media is conceptualized as a special set of media scholarship, "mass" media research requires special designs and analyses.

Suggested citation: Potter, W. J. (2013). Synthesizing a Working Definition of "Mass" Media. *Review of Communication Research*, *1*(1), 1-30.

Key words: Mass media, mass communication, conceptualization, definition, lineation theory, critical analysis

---

Editor: Giorgio P. De Marchis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Received: Feb. 14th, 2012; **Accepted:** May 25th; **Accessible online:** Oct. 2012; **Published:** Jan. 2013

Abstract

Media scholars as well as the public frequently use the terms "mass communication" and "mass media", but the meaning of these terms is often ambiguous. While it is assumed that everyone knows what these terms mean, the few scholars who attempt to define these terms struggle to capture the essence of their meaning without including elements that are faulty, and this task is becoming even more difficult in the new media environment. We are left with the troubling question: What are the "mass" media? This review constructs an answer to this question in a four step process. The first step features a critical analysis of the literature to identify definitional elements used by scholars. These definitional elements are subjected to four screens that evaluate their utility in a second step. The third step adds elements missing from the literature so as to make the eventual definition more useful in the new media environment. Finally, the fourth step features the construction of a working definition of "mass" media.

CONTENT

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS 4
Conceptualization of Receivers 4
Conceptualization of Channels of Transmission 5
Conceptualization of Senders 6
THE PROBLEM 6
Definitional Quandary 7
New Media Environment 7
Technological convergence. 7
Interactivity. 8
Information saturation. 8
Shift in marketing perspective. 9
EVALUATION OF DEFINITIONAL ELEMENTS 10
Too General 10
Too Specific 11
Faulty Elements 12
Fuzzy Elements 13
ADDING ELEMENTS 14
Audience Size 14
Sender Strategy 15
Audience Experience 16
ASSEMBLING DEFINITIONAL ELEMENTS 16
CONCLUSION 17
REFERENCES 21
APPENDIX 25
COPYRIGHT AND REPOSITORIES 30

Scholars have been studying a phenomenon they call "mass communication" or "mass media" at least as far back as the 1920s and have generated a very large literature since then (Lowry & DeFleur, 1988; Potter & Riddle, 2007). These labels of "mass communication" and "mass media" have been applied to identify a particular sub-field of study within the broader field of communication, such that it focuses on communication that is mediated in some way and thus distinguishing it from other forms of communication such as interpersonal or organizational. While these two terms have served as convenient labels, they have questionable scholarly meaning; instead, the majority of scholars have treated these terms as primitive concepts, assuming that everyone understands their meaning, perhaps because the few scholars who have attempted to parse their meaning have struggled unsuccessfully to articulate a satisfying definition. This leaves many media scholars uncomfortable with the terms and puzzled about the phenomenon itself. For example, British sociologist John Thompson (1995) observed that "It has often been noted that 'mass communication' is an infelicitous phrase" (p. 24). McQuail (1984) adds that the concept of mass "is so complex and even contradictory in its uses and connotations" (p. 35) that it has been very difficult for scholars to provide a clear definition of "mass" communication. Lowry and DeFleur (1988) take this argument even further when they assert that because this "is not a concisely defined field . . . the study of mass communication has been particularly unsystematic" (p. 3). And in 1982, Bennett observed, "If the term 'mass media' still enjoys a widespread currency, this is more by force of habit than anything else; a convenient way of marking out an area of study rather than a means of stating how that area should be studied or of outlining the assumptions from which research should proceed" (p. 31). This observation is still accurate three decades later. Scholars are still struggling with the question: What are the "mass" media?

The purpose of this review is to construct a definition of "mass media" using a process of synthesis that proceeds through four steps. The first step provides a critical analysis of the efforts of scholars who have attempted to define this phenomenon over the past nine decades. The definitional elements identified in the first step are evaluated in the second step. The third step features an examination of the current media environment where the universal digitization of messages allows them to move seamlessly across media and platforms, overwhelms audiences with message choices on every conceivable topic area, allows (and often requires) interactivity between message producers and consumers, and fragments previously large audiences into smaller and smaller niches. This new media environment suggests the need for additional elements in a definition. The fourth step results in a working definition of "mass media" that is a product of synthesizing the definitional elements into a coherent whole.

The terms "mass communication" and "mass media" are often used as synonyms (Wright, 1986), which is confusing because there are other scholars who make a clear distinction between the two with mass communication referring to a process while mass media refers to channels of information dissemina-

tion. However, even among those who do make a distinction, they cannot define mass communication without first defining mass media because mass communication is typically conceptualized as the process of disseminating information through mass media channels, that is, mass communication is not possible without mass media. Thus the task of defining the term "mass media" is more fundamental. Therefore the focus of this synthesis is on constructing a working definition of mass media. However, in the first step – the analysis of existing definitions – both the definitions of mass communication as well as mass media will be used, because definitions of mass communication may contain definitional elements that are useful for defining mass media.

Critical Analysis of Conceptualizations

Scholars who have struggled with providing formal definitions of "mass" media and "mass" communication have primarily focused on the characteristics of the receivers, channels, and senders of messages. Each of these three areas of conceptualization is critically analyzed below to identify their definitional elements.

Conceptualization of Receivers

The earliest scholarly conceptualization of mass communication was offered by Blumer (1939) who keyed his definition to the audience for the communication as being a "mass." Operating from a sociological background, Blumer distinguished "mass" from other kinds of social collectives (such as group, crowd, and public) by saying that a mass audience had no social organization, no body of custom and tradition, no established set of rules or rituals, no organized group of sentiments, and no structure or status roles. This mass audience based conceptualization of "mass communication" assumed that mediated messages were processed by everyone in the same manner. It was also believed that the processing itself was very simple, offering no psychological defenses against messages, that is, people simply accepted the messages at face value without discussing their meaning with other people. Thus the media were regarded as very powerful in their influence on members of the mass audience.

Within a short period of time, Blumer's idea of "mass" audience was discredited when it was shown that people in Western societies met few, if any, of Blumer's criteria for "mass" (Cantril, Gaudet, & Hertzog, 1940; Friedson, 1953). People were not interchangeable autonomous units all reacting the same way to a given media message. Instead, people sought out reactions from opinion leaders and others in social networks, and actively processed their own meanings (Bauer & Bauer, 1960; Bauer, 1973; Schramm, 1973).

Another conceptualization of "mass" communication was keyed to a belief in a "mass" culture which

was defined as "standardized, unoriginal, lacking in the richness, ambiguity and stimulating power of art, often ugly and debased" (McQuail, 1984, p. 37). Thus mass communication was believed to lower the level of cultural tastes by inundating audiences with pulp fiction rather than elevating the culture by presenting symphonies, operas, literature, and documentaries on profound topics. This conceptualization of "mass" was challenged by critics as being elitist. Furthermore, cultural scholars argued that audience members negotiated their own meaning and were capable of experiencing rich, personal and even artistic experiences from any kind of media message (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980).

Conceptualization of Channels of Transmission

The most common way of defining the mass media has arguably been simply to list the major channels used to disseminate messages broadly throughout a society (e.g., Berelson & Steiner, 1964; Noll, 2007; Traudt, 2005; Wright, 1986). As each new medium came along, it was easy to add it to the list, which grew from books, magazines, and newspapers to include film, recordings, radio, broadcast television, cable television, and computer/Internet. Thus many scholars could avoid the more difficult task of specifying the essence of what made certain channels "mass" and thereby get around the challenge of developing a defensible set of classification rules.

However, this ostensive form of defining the mass media has exhibited two major problems. First, without a formal definition of classification rules, it is unclear why certain media were added to the list while others are not. As Chaffee (1991) points out, the "concept of mass media is usually defined by list rather than by distillation of its core meaning, which is ambiguous. (Does *mass* refer to mass production, or to a conception of the audience as a mass, or to both?)" (p. 27).

A second problem with defining "mass" media ostensively by listing channels is that in the past two decades with the rise of personal computers and the digitization of information, the boundaries that made each medium fairly distinct have become significantly blurred. For example, a Hollywood film can be shown on broadcast television, a premium cable TV channel, on a personal computer, or even on a mobile phone. Given that the message can be the same, the target audience the same, and even the company that owns outlets across all those channels may be the same, the characteristics that distinguish channels of transmission are rendered much less important than they were in the past. Also a person's TV can be used to show home videos (which most people would not consider mass media) or to show network programming (which most people would consider mass media). Any given channel can be used in a non-mass as well as a mass-like manner, and this renders the identification of mass media by channel as useless.

Now that it is no longer useful to define the mass media simply by listing certain technological channels, scholars need to focus attention on the particular characteristics of communication technologies in

order to provide a useful definition of "mass" media. Again, Chaffee (1991) explains that "A crisis can occur in a definitional list when a new item appears that might belong on it. A distillation of meaning may be demanded, where an agreed-upon list had sufficed before. At one time, for example, there was no need for the term *mass media.* The concept of printing sufficed until about a century ago; mass media was created as a concept to accommodate twentieth-century innovations. Is it still useful in our era of new communication technologies? Cable television and video rentals seem easily added to the mass media list. But the inclusion of interactive systems (e.g., videotext, videodisc) would depend a lot on one's definition" (pp. 27-28). For these reasons, it is no longer useful to define the mass media by simply listing channels of dissemination.

Conceptualization of Senders

A key definitional element about senders has been that they represent a single source for message creation and dissemination. For example, Berelson and Steiner (1964) argued that the idea of "massiveness" of the media is their ability to communicate from a single source to large numbers of people. This idea shows up in more recent work. "Mass media are primarily used for communication from a single point to a large number of points, or from a single source to an audience that includes many people" (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998, p. 8). Also, Kawamoto (2003) defines mass media as a process using "a single communicator, or sender, and many receivers (e.g., an audience, readers, viewers, etc.) receiving content through a particular channel" (p. vii).

Given the interactive nature of the new media, the idea that the mass media should be defined as a single sender has been exposed as faulty, and it needs some analysis to clarify what the essence of "mass" means. Many Internet websites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.) rely on many people to create content and thereby act as both senders as well as receivers. Should we conclude that the Internet is not a "mass" medium because of its interactive features?

The Problem

Perhaps the most fundamental problem a scholarly field can have is a lack of clarity concerning its focal phenomenon. Without a clear definition of that phenomenon, scholars lack a set of classification rules that indicate the boundaries as well as the central essence of the thing they want to study. With the phenomenon of mass media, this problem is heightened by the dynamic nature of the media, which are changing so much that scholars are now referring to it as the new media environment.

Definitional Quandary

We are in a definitional quandary when it comes to identifying the focal phenomenon of "mass" communication. Tying "mass" communication to mass audience or to mass culture have been found to be faulty. Tying it to mass media appears to have continuing value, but that shifts the definitional challenge to defining "mass media" – a challenge made more difficult with the increasing number of technological devices used to send messages and with the blurring of the old distinctions between channels. And tying it to the old idea of senders as single point creators and disseminators of messages is also breaking down with the interactive nature of new media.

Mass media scholars need to move toward more clarity of what "mass" media means in order to overcome the faulty elements in past definitions and in order to bring the definition more up to date with the current new media environment. Until we can overcome these definitional problems, we will have no clear way of determining what constitutes "mass" media scholarship from media scholarship. Perhaps some scholars will regard such a distinction is un-important, but then this raises the question: Why do we continue to use the terms "mass" media and "mass" communication? If the distinction between mass and non-mass communication is not important, then we make the assumption that all media are the same. My argument is that there is an important conceptual difference between "mass" media and non-mass media and that this difference has implications for the design of research and the reporting of findings from our research.

New Media Environment

We now find ourselves in a media environment unlike any we have ever experienced before. The newest technological developments of personal computers, the Internet, cell phones, and other handheld portable devices for connecting to messages and other people have not just changed society but have changed the older, more traditional media themselves. This new media environment is characterized by four interrelated features: technological convergence, interactivity, information saturation, and a shift in marketing perspective.

Technological convergence.

Media convergence is the movement away from distinct media channels toward a common platform where all kinds of messages are shared (Jenkins, 2006, Nayar, 2010). The common platform thus allows for the user to access words, pictures, video, and audio as well as send their own text and voice messages. Nayar (2010) argues that all media are now crossover media which means that they all adapt and borrow from

each other. "Movies merge into computer games, and computer games generate fan sites, movie plots, and toys; advertisers use computer gameworlds . . . A cell phone serves as an email device . . . as a camera, a movie-making device, a conferencing facility, and a personal diary" (p. 2). Not only are the media reconfigured but society is also reconfigured where "computer-mediated communication becomes the dominant form of social interaction" (p. 3). This convergence has been made possible through a process of what Bolter and Grusin (2000) call remediation where all media engage in a complex and ongoing process in which the tactics, styles, and content of other media are mimicked, then critiqued and extended.

This convergence is also a product of the conglomeration of media ownership. Jenkins (2003) explains, "Technological convergence is attractive to media industries because it opens multiple entry points into the consumption process and at the same time, enables consumers to more quickly locate new manifestations of a popular narrative" (p. 284). Thus companies who own many platforms of communication can achieve economies of scale by amortizing the cost of producing a message across many different outlets; that is, once they have paid to have a message produced they send it out through the newspapers, magazines, cable channels, and Internet sites they own or control.

Interactivity.

With the introduction of personal computers and the innovation to network them, people began to use the mass media in interactive ways. More than two decades ago, Rice (1984a) recognized the profound change that computers represented to media communication due to their ability to allow audience members to interact. Thus the distinction between sender and receiver has broken down within the mass communication experience.

The technological potential for interaction has attracted an increasing demand for platforms where people can share their expertise (such as Wikipedia), share personal observations (blogs and Twitter), share all aspects of their personal lives (Facebook, MySpace), or create a new personal life (dating sites, Second Life). More and more people are using communication media platforms to participate in all kinds of activities, such as gaming, relationship building, and public activism. They can use a variety of platforms to participate in e-commerce as both buyers as well as sellers of all kinds of goods and services (eBay, Amazon, Craigslist).

Information saturation.

This potential for all kinds of interactions along with the digitization of information and increasingly high speed access has touched off an explosion of information creation. Rice (1984b) pointed out that by the early 1980s, "approximately half of the U. S. gross national product is devoted to the creation, handling,

and distribution of information" (p. 23). Since that time, even newer information technologies have been added, and the amount of information created and disseminated each year has grown exponentially. By 2007, there were more than 281 exabytes of information produced in that one year alone (Infoniac.com, 2008, March 13). That is 28-million bytes produced in that one year for each byte of information stored in the entire Library of Congress. Much of this information is recorded and transmitted by the mass media. Throughout the world, radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming each year, and television adds another 48 million hours. In the United States alone, there are now more than 400,000 book titles published annually (Potter, 2010). The amount of information available has fundamentally changed the audience experience with the media. No longer is there a problem with information access; the problem is now how to adapt to a flood of messages aggressively competing for our attention.

In order to deal with all these exposure opportunities, audiences have been spending more time with the mass media (Angwin, 2009), especially the younger generation (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Children now spend enough time with the media that it would account for 70% of their waking hours, however much of this media use is multi-tasking where several media are being used at the same time (Ransford, 2005).

Given all the choices and the multi-tasking during exposures, the audience media experience has changed over time. When the number of choices is large, humans typically make quick intuitive decisions based on prior conditioning rather than informed choice that requires more effort (Kahneman, 2011; Schwartz, 2004; Wright, 2007). This is clearly the case in the new media environment where there is an overwhelming number of choices every minute of everyday. Therefore, people rely largely on automatic routines that have been conditioned by the mass media over the years (Potter, 2009a).

Shift in marketing perspective.

The amount of information available has fundamentally changed how media companies market their messages. To survive in the new media environment with so many message alternatives constantly competing for audience members' attention, all mass media – the newer technologies as well as the more traditional older media – have been shifting to a marketing strategy that begins with identifying needs in some segment of the general population (Arens, Weigold, & Arens, 2009; Hirsch, 1981). The strategy then directs the mass media business to create or stimulate content that can attract members of that niche audience to their particular platform where they can charge those people an access fee (such as a subscription to a newspaper, magazine, website, Internet game, etc.), a usage fee (downloading music, video, texting, etc.) and also charge advertisers an access fee to their constructed audiences. The media businesses must also condition their audience members for repeat exposures so as to amortize the high cost of initially attracting

those people and thus make the enterprise economically viable. This conditioning of audiences for repeated exposures is important regardless of whether the media present pre-constructed messages or whether the media provide a platform for audience interactivity that requires audience members to construct the content.

Evaluation of Definitional Elements

The result of the critical analysis conducted in the first step of this process of synthesis is a list of 23 definitional elements (see Table 1). These definitional elements are organized in six categories. The first five of these categories follow Lasswell's (1948) category scheme of who (sender) says what (message) in which channel (channel) to whom (audience) with what effect (effect)? The sixth category includes definitional elements that span across two or more of these categories and describe the relationships among elements across categories. Each of the categories has multiple elements.

In this second step of this synthesis process, those 23 definitional elements are evaluated. The criterion in this evaluation process is the utility in serving as classification rules that can be used to distinguish between mass and non-mass media. This step applies four screens. The first screen is for elements that are too general, that is, definitional elements that are good descriptors of the mass media but that also describe things well beyond the mass media. The second screen is for elements that are too specific, that is, definitional elements that are good classification rules for some mass media but not others. The third screen is for faulty definitional elements; these are definitional elements that cannot be applied as classification rules. The fourth screen is for the elements that are fuzzy; these are definitional elements that are potentially useful as classification rules but that are defined in too ambiguous a manner.

Too General

This first screen identifies elements that are too general and filters them out of the definitional process. When a definitional element is too general, it loses it classification power because it does not discriminate between mass and non-mass channels. These definitional elements typically describe the mass media well and accurately, but because they also describe phenomenon well beyond the mass media, they are filtered out as classification rules.

This filter screens out six of the definitional elements (see Table 2). Of course, the mass media messages are commodities (M4) and are cultural products consisting of symbolic content (M5). But these characteristics are not exclusive to media messages, so they cannot serve as useful classification rules. A family portrait from Sears is a commodity advertised and sold for a profit, but it is a private message, not one available to the masses. Also, the set of things that are cultural products using symbolic content is vast

and includes many things (e.g., objects in museums and personal conversations to name a few) beyond media messages, so this definitional element is not useful in discriminating between "mass" and non-mass media.

The characteristics that the audience is fragmenting (A6) is not limited to media audiences but applies to the entire population in terms of their interests, lifestyles, political orientations, career choices, family structures, etc. The audience gives meaning to messages (A8); of course this is widely accepted as true, but people also give meaning to non-media interactions such as interpersonal conversations, relationships, workplace rules, etc. And the two effects definitional elements – the media influence other institutions (E1) and the media affect culture (E2) – also apply to non-mass media messages.

These six definitional elements that were screened out as being too general indicate large classes of ideas of which the mass media are a part. If our task were to articulate how the mass media are associated with other ideas, then these six elements would make a good starting place, however, this list would need to be expanded to include other classes of ideas that include the mass media.

Too Specific

The second screen is for elements that are too specific. Some definitional elements are good classification rules for some mass media but not others, so they are not general enough to capture all mass media and thus need to be filtered out.

This screen filters out three definitional elements. While the element that senders employ professional communicators and sell access to other organizations that themselves employ professional communicators (S3) applies to the more traditional media, it does not apply to the newer media, such as websites that allow users to create their own content. Thus websites such as Wikipedia, MySpace, and eBay heavily market content that is created by users for free. In addition, the two relational definitional elements – asymmetry between senders and receivers (R1) as well as a structured break between senders and receivers (R2) – does not apply well to newer forms of the mass media. The more traditional media are seeking more feedback as they more closely monitor audience reactions and alter content to fulfill needs better and more quickly. Also, the distinction between message producer and audience member is breaking down, especially with the newer forms of media that are highly interactive. Audiences playing massive online role playing games such as World of Warcraft or Second Life are in a sense the creators of most of the content as well as serving as audience members. Blogs and websites such as Wikipedia rely on audiences to provide a high proportion (or almost all) of the content. To require content providers to be institutions or to expect a structured break between message production and reception would prevent interactive experiences from being included. Thus we need to move beyond the limitation of regarding mass media organizations as

creating content and think about their essential function as disseminating content. Of course, a mass media organization can create its own content with its in-house professionally trained producers, but this is not required; it can allow all kinds of people to provide content. However, what is essential is that the organization disseminates content.

These three definitional elements, that were screened out as being too specific, would be useful to explore if the task were to look for meaningful sub-components within the broader idea of mass media. However, our task here is to find classification rules, so the definitional elements need to be broad enough to include all mass media.

Faulty Elements

There are some elements from Blumer's "mass" audience conceptualization still appearing in definitions despite the fact that much of this conceptualization was found faulty more than half a century ago. The definitional elements of the audience being heterogeneous (A2), anonymous (A3), and passive with no chance of feedback to senders (A7) are all faulty. Today the mass media have a niche orientation to audiences, which rules out heterogeneous audiences. Niches are defined by a small set of characteristics, such that all members of the niche audience share those characteristics, thus it is the commonalities – not the variety of difference – that define audiences.

Audience members for mass media messages have lost their anonymity. The newer media have addressability, which means that senders know exactly who is in the audience. Computers have IP addresses and cookies, and cell phones have numbers keyed to individuals so that providers know who is accessing which apps and downloading which movies. The more traditional media also collect a good deal of information on users before granting access. For example, subscribers to magazines and newspapers provide their name, address, educational level, credit card numbers, etc.

The idea that audiences are not able to provide feedback to senders is also faulty. This is obvious with the new media that are characterized by their interactivity (Rice, 1984b). The more traditional media have also become much more interactive with their audiences. While they do not check with every audience member to find out his/her reaction to each message exposure, they do conduct a great deal of research to study audience-wide reactions to messages so they can alter the messages over time and bring them more in line with audience needs.

There are also several faulty elements concerning the messages. The definitional element that the messages are addressed to no one in particular (M2) is related to A2 above. And the element that messages are transient (A3) is no longer valid with all the recording and storage devices now commonly available; once a message is transmitted in a mass medium, it continues to be available for a long period of time.

Fuzzy Elements

The fourth screen identifies three elements that are fuzzy, that is they are not clear enough to be used a classification rules but that have been defined in too ambiguous a manner in the past. Two of these definitional elements are concerned with on audience size and the other concerns the nature of the sender.

Notice that scholars have struggled with the idea about how large an audience needs to be (A1) and that the message needs to be designed to reach many people (M1). These are faulty classification rules because there is no non-arbitrary threshold for how large the audience needs to be in order for it to be considered a "mass." For example, Thompson (1995) argues that the term 'mass' "conjures up the image of a vast audience comprising many thousands, even millions of individuals. This may be an accurate image in the case of some media products, such as the most popular modern-day newspapers, films and television programmes; but it is hardly an accurate representation of the circumstance of most media products, past or present" (p. 24). He concludes, "So if the term 'mass' is to be used, it should not be construed in narrowly quantitative terms" (p. 24).

Some scholars have tried to clarify what "large" means. For example, Wright (1986) explains that 'large' means that "an audience composed of too many people for the communicator to interact with personally during a reasonable period of time" (Wright, 1986, p. 7). Webster and Phalen (1997) try to get around this threshold problem by arguing that in order to be a mass, the audience "must be of sufficient size that individual cases (e.g., the viewer, the family, the social network) recede in importance and the dynamic of a larger entity emerges" (p. 9). However, we are left with the question of *how large* an audience needs to be in order for individual cases to recede, so we are still caught in the quantitative threshold trap.

We need to move beyond a quest for the magic threshold number and consider something else, because most scholars would agree that a local radio program that reaches 1,000 households in a market is an example of a mass media message, but it is likely that these same scholars would not consider the 5,000 fans at a stadium watching a high school football game as an example of a mass media experience. Clearly audience size -- with its threshold problem -- is not a useful criterion for determining "mass" media.

The other element of concern with this screen is the nature of the sender, which has become fuzzy with the interactive capabilities offered by the new media environment. This is the requirement that the sender is a complex organization or institution, not an individual (S1). The reason that this element has become fuzzy is that people could argue that individuals could now be a mass medium because of their ability to use interactive services to create and disseminate content to particular niche audiences and even continually produce content to condition those audience members. However, we need to make a distinction between content providers and a "mass" medium. In order to be considered a mass medium, an organization need not produce the content it disseminates; it can rely on content providers who are non-profession-

al and who are unpaid by the organization. The key definitional element is not that the organization produces its own content but that the organization disseminates content in a mass-like fashion. For example, a wide range of senders (individuals, organizations, businesses, etc.) produce messages on put it on the Facebook platform. However, the production of that content does not make any of these content providers a "mass" medium; it is Facebook that makes the dissemination possible, so it is Facebook that is the "mass" medium. In a parallel fashion, when a journalist publishes an article in *Time* magazine, she is not a mass medium; instead she is a content provider. Thus the idea of complex organization becomes even more important. The new media environment has made it much easier for individuals to become providers of all kinds of content, but in order for this content to be disseminated in a mass-like fashion, it requires the services of a complex organization.

Adding Elements

At this point we are left with seven definitional elements from the beginning 23. Before presenting these seven as the definition of mass media, we need to consider what may be missing from this list, which is the third step in this process of synthesis as laid out in the introduction.

Given the most salient characteristics of the current media environment, it seems important to add three definitional elements that were missing in the list of 23 elements identified in previous definitions. The first of these is a reworking of the faulty element of audience size. The other two are important characteristics of the new media environment – sender strategy and audience experience.

Audience Size

The idea of audience size seems important because it appears in so many scholars' definitions either explicitly or implicitly. However, as long as we focus on audience size itself, we are stuck with a faulty element that relies on a quantitative threshold. If instead, we shifted the focus to a goal of *maximizing* audience size we could get beyond the threshold problem. This goal orientation is especially appropriate in the new media environment. With the niche audience orientation, mass media organizations no longer try to appeal to the huge general audience; instead their goals are directed toward niche audiences, then maximizing the attractiveness of their messages so as to appeal to all people within that niche. Non-mass media are satisfied with attracting a few people within a niche, while mass media strive to maximize the reach of their messages within each niche.

There is a second feature of this "fix" of the definitional element of size, and this shifts the focus away from reach and onto gross impressions. These are advertising terms. Reach refers to the percentage

of audience members within a niche who are exposed to a message, while gross impressions refer to the total number of exposures to a particular message. Gross impressions reflect both the number of people in a niche exposed as well as the number of times people were exposed. Thus it is concerned with frequency in addition to reach. Because of the advertising support required by the mass media, we need to acknowledge that number of exposures are at least as important if not more important than number of audience members. Three message exposures from a single audience member is just as valuable as is a single exposure from three different people, because mass media organizations sell *exposures* to advertisers, rather than numbers of audience members (Arens, Weigold, & Arens, 2009). Frequency reflects repeated exposures and this is important for conditioning audiences over time.

This definitional element of audience size then is transformed into: senders attempt to maximize the number of audience exposures in each target niche. The key to this definitional element lies not in reaching some threshold of audience size but rather the sender's awareness of a niche audience as a target and the motivation to maximize audience exposures within that niche. This element then suggests the importance of another element of sender strategy to act on this motivation.

Sender Strategy

In order to direct the motivation for maximizing exposures within a niche audience, the sender must adopt a strategy to attract potential audience members from that niche. Thus if an organization sets up a platform to allow people to blog about some social issue and simply waits to see who expose themselves to the site, that is not meeting this definitional element. However if the organization searches out potential audience members in other blogs and advertises in those blogs or provides hot links there, then the organization is marketing its service and working to attract members of a particular niche. Thus this definitional element highlights the idea that the "mass" media are not interested in creating messages simply for self expression or for seeing if they can create a certain kind of message; instead, the mass media are interested in creating messages primarily to attract a certain kind of audience and to maximize exposures within that niche.

Related to the attraction strategy is the need to condition those audience members for repeat exposures. It would seem highly characteristic of the "mass" media that they are not interested in attracting audience members for a one time exposure – like concert promoters do. Instead, the "mass" media would seem much more interested in constructing audiences that habitually expose themselves to the continuing flow of messages, because the mass media are entities that rely on continual exposures in order to continue to exist. Therefore they need to do more than attract audiences for one time exposures; they also need to condition those audiences for repeat exposures. They do this because attraction costs are so high that once

they have attracted an audience, they need to condition habitual repeated exposure in order to amortize those initial costs over repeated exposures. This is a definitional element that has been missing in the literature thus far and one that should be considered because it would seem to be highly characteristic of the mass media and serve as a good discriminator between "mass" and non-mass media.

Audience Experience

One final definitional element needs to be added to the mix, that is, audiences need not be exposed in an attentional state, that is, audiences need not be active. They need not carefully process the message. They need not be able to consciously recall any information or experience from the message exposure. Nothing is required from an audience member other than exposure, because the success at continuing as a mass medium requires nothing from audience members except exposures, which count whether they are conscious or unconscious. In fact, there is a premium placed on unconscious habitual exposure because then people are conditioned to repeat exposures automatically. This definitional element does not rule out attentional exposures, however, it does not require it. The mass medium counts all audience member exposures equally, whether those audience members encountered the messages in an attentional or an automatic exposure state.

Assembling Definitional Elements

The fourth and final step in this process of synthesis is to assemble the 10 individual definitional elements into a set that can serve as a useful working definition for "mass media" (see Table 3). In constructing that set, we need to think about necessary and sufficient conditions. My argument is that all 10 are necessary elements, and none is sufficient. That is, all 10 definitional conditions must be met in order for something to be considered "mass media." Although the list of 10 elements is rather long, the structure is simple. By this I mean that the calculus of using the definitional elements for classification is not complicated. It is not cluttered with non-necessary qualifications or require complex substitutable qualifications (e.g., if condition #1 is not met, then the object can still be classified as a mass medium if it meets both conditions #2 and #3 and also fails to meet either condition #4 or #5). Therefore in order for something to be considered a "mass" medium, it must meet all 10 classification rules.

Notice that the definition does not focus messages or effects on the relationships across the different categories. Also, its conceptualization of channels is broad enough to include all the newer media in addition to the more traditional media. Channels of message dissemination are technological devices that (1)

can reach audiences within a relatively short time, even simultaneously, (2) make messages public (i.e., available to anyone), and (3) extend the availability of messages in time and space. Channels are not defined ostensively by channels, because while the ostensive form of definition has been useful in the past, it has lost its usefulness with the blurring of distinctions across channels. For example, is a newspaper that has a website with film clips and musical recordings in its stories still a newspaper or is it a website, a film library, a store for recordings? With this working definition, it does not matter – it is a message delivery service that relies on many different channels. The way it delivers its message and the type of audience is much more important in determining whether it is a mass medium or not. So the mass medium is better referenced by the name of the organization rather than by the name of a channel.

The sender of messages must be (1) a complex organization (2) that uses standardized practices to disseminate content (3) while actively promote itself in order to attract as many audience members as possible and (4) condition those audience members for habitual repeated exposures. The first two of these conditions are important to distinguish between individual contributors to the mass media from the mass media themselves. For example, a person who creates a Facebook page creates messages to attract a certain niche audience and may be very successful in conditioning visitors for repeat exposures, but it is Facebook and not the page designer who is the mass medium because it is the organization of Facebook that has created the technological and marketing platform that makes the pages possible.

Also, the audience is important because it must be composed of people who are (1) are widely dispersed geographically, that is not all in one place, (2) are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing, and (3) encounter messages in a variety of exposure states but most often in a state of automaticity. Mass communication then is defined as the process of using the mass media to disseminate messages to specific niche audiences in a manner to maximize exposures within those niches and conditioning niche audience members for habitual repeat exposures to subsequent messages.

Conclusion

Media scholars can argue that even though the definitions of mass media and mass communication might have contained faulty elements over the years, researchers have still been able to produce a very large literature of empirical studies about the media. There is no denying that the media literature is large, perhaps as large as 10,000 published studies (Potter & Riddle, 2007). However, my argument is that not all studies of the media are studies of the "mass" media. There is a difference between the two and this difference is important to recognize.

The working definition of "mass" media synthesized in this review helps clarify the distinction

between media and "mass" media. It shows that the idea of "mass" media is a special case of media with the way that senders and receivers are conceptualized which leads to the way the technological channels are used. Thus it follows that not all media research is "mass" media research. In essence, the distinction between media research and mass media research is the distinction between potentialities and actualities. Media research is concerned with the full range of channels of message dissemination, the range of how they ***can*** be used, and all the possible ways they ***can*** affect individuals and society. In contrast, "mass" media research necessarily must focus on a particular way those channels ***are*** used; that is, how people who are offered a wide range of media and messages in the flow of their ordinary lives actually choose certain media and messages, how they process meaning from those messages within the idiosyncratic contexts of their everyday lives, and how those filtered-in messages gradually shape their knowledge structures, attitudes, beliefs, emotional reactions, and behavioral patterns over time. Thus with the "mass" media, researchers need to examine individuals' exposure patterns in the context of overwhelming choice and a long history of conditioning from previous exposures. Also, "mass" media effects cannot be adequately assessed in one-shot laboratory experiments, nor can "mass" media exposures and experiences be adequately assessed by asking participants to recall these mundane experiences in surveys relying on self report data. This is not an argument against the use of experiments or surveys -- or more generally of the scientific method. Experiments and surveys are useful tools that can generate valuable findings that *suggest what might be occurring* as individuals interact with the "mass" media in their everyday lives. But now it is time to move beyond potentialities, which have been well delineated by the large literature on media, and focus on actualities, which will require a different orientation in the research. "Mass" media scholars will need to shift their attention along four design dimensions in order to make their empirical findings more keyed to "mass" media in contrast to media. These four design dimensions are setting of the investigation, source of data, time focus, and unit of analysis.

Setting of investigation. A continuum of options for the setting of an investigation can range from highly controlled settings to highly naturalistic ones. Laboratory experiments are very useful for controlling treatment conditions, but they are highly artificial with their settings, forced (rather than chosen) media exposure, and demand for certain types of message interpretations as constrained by measurement techniques. While the laboratory setting is useful for identifying potential effects, it has little value in documenting what actually occurs in the naturalistic setting of audiences' everyday lives where they are constantly confronted with an overwhelming number of choices; where they make these choices and message interpretations in a largely automatic fashion that has been conditioned to various degrees by media exposures over time; where they are multi-tasking during exposures, and where they interpret meaning through interpersonal conversations during exposures. If we want a more accurate understanding of what

actually happens in a person's everyday media use and interpretation process, we need to move more into the naturalistic neighborhoods of this continuum.

Source of data. A great deal of the data in the media literature comes from self reports by research participants. In a content analysis of 8 communication journals from 1995 to 2009, we identified 575 published articles examining media effects of various kinds (Potter, 2011). Over 82% of these articles relied on self reports. Of course, self reporting is the most valid source of information for some effects, such as knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. But the self reporting of behaviors has been shown to be much less valid than observations of behaviors or the recording of behaviors using electronic devices. Yet even the literature of behavioral effects is dominated by self reports. In our content analysis, we found that with the study of behavioral effects, over 88% of the published studies relied on self reports (Potter, 2011). Much of the way people make their exposure decisions and construct meaning of messages is done in a relatively automatic fashion, so they do not have specific recollections of much of what happens during exposures (Lamberts & Goldstone, 2005; Potter, 2009b). It is rather like driving a car, that is, when people first learn to drive, they are hyper-vigilant as they consciously work through each and every step. Their memory is highly engaged. However, after driving for a few years, the experience is so routinized that they are largely on automatic pilot unless something highly unusual happens to trigger their conscious attention. Given the years of exposure with the "mass" media, the amount of time spent with the mass media each and every week, and the degree of conditioning from the media organizations, the exposure and effects patterns are strongly fixed sub-consciously. Therefore much of the effects of the mass media on knowledge acquisition, attitude formation, beliefs, and behavioral patterns are beyond the capacity of humans to relate to researchers accurately.

Time focus. The time focus continuum runs from measurement at one point in time (snapshot) up to a long series of repeated measures over time. With "mass" media research we need to look at a person's history of conditioning to establish an adequate context to interpret the meaning of any change during an exposure; then we need to continue to look at that change to see if it decays or gets stronger over time. However, only a small percentage of the media effects published research present findings that are based on more data than a snapshot. In our content analysis of the published literature, we found that only 7.7% of all effects studies used repeated measures. Even among the 262 articles that claimed to present findings of long term effects, only 9.2% measured for the effect at more than a single point in time. This snapshot perspective on research strips out all the context that could be so valuable in explaining effects. It also limits the literature from examining the pattern of media influence over time. Clearly there needs to be a longitudinal element to "mass" media research in order to establish a pattern of media use, meaning interpretation, and effects among people leading up to exposure to a particular message then to establish a pat-

tern of changes (or reinforcement) subsequent to the exposure.

Unit of analysis. Media research typically uses the individual as the unit of data gathering, but then switches to the group as the unit of analysis. That is, the responses of individuals are averaged together, and a mean is computed to represent the group (either a treatment group or a group constructed in the analysis from categorical variables, such as gender, ethnic background, etc.). This procedure makes for an efficient comparison across groups but it strips out a great deal of context that could be valuable as a source of explanation about media filtering, interpretations, and effects.

"Mass" media research needs to use the individual as both the unit of data gathering and the unit of analysis, as I have argued in Lineation theory (Potter, 2009a). To illustrate, designers of experiments need to take measures of their research participants both before as well as after their exposure to the treatments. This is not an innovative idea; it has been recommended as a key feature in experimental designs for years (eg., Campbell & Stanley, 1963), and it still is (eg., Babbie, 2012; Wimmer & Dominick, 2010), however, very few experimenters follow this recommendation, which is a serious shortcoming of the literature because the use of pre-treatment measures allows experimenters to examine four things in their analyses, rather than only one as post-treatment only experiments allow. With such a design, experimenters can still compare means across groups on their post-test scores. But in addition, experimenters can also compare means on pre-treatment measures across groups to determine that their treatment groups are truly matched in a fair caparison, and if those groups are found not to be matched fairly, experimenters can use the pre-treatment data to make the proper adjustments in their analyses so a fair comparison can be accomplished there. Another advantage to collecting pre-treatment scores is that researchers can better understand what their participants bring to the experimental situation. A profile of pre-treatment beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, physiological baselines, etc. provides a rich context for the interpretations of any differences found post-treatment. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, this design allows for the computation of change between the pre-treatment and post-treatment scores, so experimenters can move beyond analyzing simple mean differences across treatment conditions, and can construct alternative groups based on degree of change, which is likely to be found attributable to participants' psychological traits and states rather than to the experiments' arbitrary assignment of participants to conditions. Thus the addition of one element (pre-treatment measuring) to an experimental design, opens up at least three additional avenues for analysis that offer great potential for increasing our understanding about how the complex process of media influence works.

Given the working definition developed in this review, the audience's experience with "mass" media is an everyday occurrence that is strongly integrated into their mundane routines of seeking out messages to meet their personal needs and automatically making their own idiosyncratic interpretations of the mean-

ing of those messages. Each exposure takes place deeply embedded in the context of a long history of specific exposure patterns and interpretations in an environment saturated with message choices where senders aggressively compete for the attention of people in target niches. All of these characteristics comprise the essence of the "mass" media experience.

It is essential they we focus more on this experience in our research if we are to move beyond our practice of studying the media in general and using the findings of that broad literature to characterize the essence of the "mass" media. Therefore "mass" media research needs to rely less on laboratory experiments and more on field experiments to take a more naturalistic approach of examining how people choose their exposures in the condition of overwhelming choice in their everyday lives, how they experience those exposures largely in a state of automaticity, and how the media exert their influence in an arc of many exposures over time. "Mass" media research needs to rely less on self reported motives, gratifications, and hours with media recalled well after those exposures and more on observation and electronic recording of actual patterns. Thus the working definition developed in this article does more than draw a conceptual difference between the phenomenon of media and mass media, it also draws a distinction between two types of research.

References

Angwin, J. (2009). *Stealing MySpace: The battle to control the most popular website in America*. New York: Random House.

Arens, W. F., Weigold, M. F., & Arens, C. (2009). *Contemporary advertising* (12th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

Babbie, E. (2012). *The practice of social research, 13th edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Ball-Rokeach, S. J., & Cantor, M. G. (1986). *Media, audience, and social structure*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. K. (2000). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future (2nd ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Bauer, R. A. (1973). The audience. In I. S. Pool, F. W. Frey, W. Schramm, N. Maccoby, & E. B. Parker (Eds.). *Handbook of communication* (pp. 141-152). Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing.

Bauer, R. A., & Bauer, A. (1960). America, mass society and mass media. *Journal of Social Issues, 10*(3), 3–66.

Bennett, T. (1982). Theories of the media, theories of society. In M. Gurevitch, T. Bennett, J. Curran, & J. Woollacott (Eds.),*Culture, society and the media* (pp. 30-55). London: Methuen.

Berelson, B., & Steiner, G. A. (1964). *Human behavior: An inventory of scientific findings*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Blumer, H. (1939). The mass, the public and public opinion. In A. M. Lee (Ed.). *New outlines of the principles of sociology*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Campbell, D., & Stanley. J. (1963). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Cantril, H., Gaudet, H., & Hertzog, H. (1940). *The invasion from Mars.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Carrier, R. (2004). History of mass communication. In J. R. Baldwin, S. D. Perry, & M. A. Moffitt (Eds.), *Communication theories for everyday life* (pp. 187-200). Boston: Pearson.

Chaffee, S. H. (1991). *Communication concepts 1: Explication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

DeFleur, M. L., & Dennis, E. E. (1996). *Understanding mass communication: A liberal arts perspective*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Fiske, J., & Hartley, J. (1978). *Reading television*. New York: Methuen.

Friedson, E. (1953). The relation of the social situation of contact to the media in mass communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 17*, 230-238.

Grossberg, L., Wartella, E., & Whitney, D. C. (1998). *Mediamaking: Mass media in a popular culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S Hall et al. (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128-139). London: Hutchinson.

Hirsch, P. M. (1981). Institutional function of elite and mass media. In E. Katz & T. Szecsko (Eds.), *Mass media and social change* (pp. 187-200). London: Sage.

Infoniac.com (2008, March 13). The amount of digital information reached 281 exabytes (281 billion gigabytes). Retrieved Sept. 11, 2009 from http://www.infoniac.com/hi-tech/amount-digital-information-reached-281-exabytes.html

Janowitz, M. (1968). The study of mass communication. In the *International Encyclopedia of he Social Sciences* (Vol 3, pp. 41-53). New York: Macmillan.

Jenkins, H. (2003). Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital cinema, media convergence, and participatory culture. In D. Thorburn & H. Jenkins (eds.). *Rethinking media change: The aesthetics of transition* (pp. 281-312). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kaiser Family Foundation (2005, March). Key Findings from New Research on Children's Media Use. Retrieved August 23, 2009 from http://www.kaisernetwork.org/health_cast/hcast_index.cfm?display=detail&hc=1377

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kawamoto, D. (2003). *Media and society in the digital age*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Lamberts, K., & Goldstone, R. L. (Eds.). (2005). *Handbook of cognition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lasswell, H. D. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 37-51). New York: Harper.

Littlejohn, S. W. (1999). *Theories of human communication (6th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Lorimer, R. (1994). *Mass communications: A comparative introduction*. New York: Manchester University Press.

Lowery, S. A., & DeFleur, M. L. (1988). *Milestones in mass communication research (2nd ed.).* White Plains, NY: Longman.

McQuail, D. (1984). *Mass communication theory: An introduction*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

McQuail, D., & Windahl, S. (1981). *Communication models for the study of mass communications*. New York: Longman.

Morley, D. (1980). *The 'Nationwide' audience: Structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.

Nayar, P. K. (Ed.) (2010). *The new media and cybercultures anthology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Noll, A. M. (2007). *The evolution of media*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Pavlik, J. V., & McIntosh, S. (2004). *Converging media: A new introduction to mass communication*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pool, I. S. (1973). Communication systems, In I. S. Pool, F. W. Frey, W. Schramm, N. Maccoby, & E. B. Parker (Eds.), *Handbook of communication* (pp. 3-26). Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing.

Potter, W. J. (2011, May). *Critique of the scholarly field of mass media effects*. Paper presented to the Mass Communication Division of the International Communication Association, Boston.

Potter, W. J. (2009a). *Arguing for a general framework for mass media scholarship*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Potter, W. J. (2009b). Conceptualizing the audience. In R. Nabi & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Handbook of media effects* (pp. 19-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Potter, W. J. (2010). *Media literacy* (5th edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Potter, W. J., & Riddle K. (2007). A content analysis of the media effects literature. *Journalism & Mass of Communication Quarterly, 84*, 90-104.

Ransford, M. (2005, September 23). Average person spends more time using media than anything else. *Ball State University News Center*. Retrieved October 30, 2006 from www.bsu.edu/up/article/0,1370,32363-2914-36658,00.html.

Rice, R. E. (1984a). New media technology: Growth and integration. In R. E. Rice et al. (Eds.), *The new media: Communication, research, and technology* (pp. 33-54). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Rice, R. E. (1984b). Development of new media research. In R. E. Rice et al. (Eds.), *The new media: Communication, research, and technology* (pp. 15-31). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Schramm, W. (1971). The nature of communication between humans. In W. Schramm & D. F. Roberts (Eds.), *The process and effects of mass communication, revised edition* (pp. 3-53). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Schramm, W. (1973). Channels and audiences. In I. S. Pool, F. W. Frey, W. Schramm, N. Maccoby, & E. B. Parker (Eds.), *Handbook of communication* (pp. 116-140). Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing.

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York: HarperCollins.

Severin, W. J., & Tankard, J. W., Jr. (2001). *Communication theories: Origins, methods, and uses in the mass media (5th ed.)*. New York: Longman.

Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Traudt, P. J. (2005). *Media, audiences, effects*. Boston: Pearson.

Turow, J. (1991). A mass communication perspective on entertainment industries. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (pp. 160-177). London: Edward Arnold.

Webster, J G., & Phalen, P. F. (1997). *The mass audience: Rediscovering the dominant model*. Mahway, NJ: Erlbaum.

Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2010). *Mass media research: An introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Wright, A. (2007). *Glut: Mastering information through the ages*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.

Wright, C. R. (1959). *Mass communication: A sociological perspective.* New York: Random House.

Wright, C. R. (1975). Social structure and mass communication behavior. In L. Coser (Ed.), *The idea of social structure: Papers in honor of Robert K. Merton..* New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich.

Wright, C. R. (1986). *Mass communication: A sociological perspective (3rd ed.).* New York: Random House.

Appendix

Table 1: Analysis of Definitions of Mass Communication and Mass Media

Senders

S1. Complex organization or institution, not an individual (Baran & Davis, 2000; Berelson & Steiner, 1964; Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998; Kawamoto, 2003; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Pool, 1973; Schramm, 1971; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Turow, 1991; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986)

S2. Uses standardized practices to mass produce the messages and disseminate them (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; Littlejohn, 1999; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail, 2005; Schramm, 1973; Thompson, 1995; Turow, 1991; Schramm, 1971)

Extensive division of labor - produced by persons occupying certain roles (owners, regulators, producers, distributors, advertisers, audience members)' convey information, entertainment, images and symbols to a mass audience (large, widely dispersed and lacking awareness to act in concert) (Lorimer, 1994; Wright, 1986)

Operate according to certain laws, rules and understandings (professional codes and practices, audience and societal expectations and habits) (Lorimer, 1994)

S3. Uses professional communicators (journalist, presenter, producer, entertainer, etc.) whom it employs. Also sells access to other voices (advertiser, politician, preacher, advocate of a cause, etc) who use professional communicators (DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; McQuail, 2005)

Production and dissemination is expensive because production is labor intensive (Janowitz, 1968; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986)

Messages

M1. Messages are designed to reach many (McQuail, 2005)

M2. Messages are addressed to no one in particular, their content is open for public oversight (Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986)

M3. Messages are transient in character (Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

M4. Messages are commodities (Lorimer, 1994; McQuail, 2005; Thompson, 1995)

M5. Messages are cultural products consisting of symbolic content, often of great complexity (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; Janowitz, 1968; McQuail, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Thompson, 1995; Turow, 1991)

Channel

C1. Technological devices are used so that messages can reach audiences within a relatively short time, even simultaneously (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; Baran & Davis, 2000; Berelson & Steiner, 1964; Carrier, 2004; DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; Kawamoto, 2003; Littlejohn, 1999; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Noll, 2007; Schramm, 1971; Thompson, 1995; Turow, 1991; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986)

C2. Technological devices make messages public, that is available to anyone (Littlejohn, 1999; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

C3. Technological devices extend the availability of message in time and space (Thompson, 1995)

Audience

A1. The audience is relatively large (Baran & Davis, 2000; Carrier, 2004; DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998; Janowitz, 1968; Kawamoto, 2003; Littlejohn, 1999; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Noll, 2007; Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

A2. The audience is composed of heterogeneous individuals (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; Carrier, 2004; DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; Janowitz, 1968; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Noll, 2007; Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

A3. The audience is composed of anonymous individuals (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; Carrier, 2004; DeFleur & Dennis, 1996; Janowitz, 1968; Lorimer, 1994; McQuail, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Noll, 2007; Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

A4. Widely dispersed geographically, that is not all in one place (Carrier, 2004; Janowitz, 1968; McQuail & Windahl, 1981).

A5. Audience members are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing (Wright, 1959, 1975, 1986).

A6. Increasingly fragmented (Lorimer, 1994)

A7. Audiences are largely passive recipients of the messages, that is, there is no opportunity for feedback (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004)

A8. Audience members engage and give meaning to media contents (Littlejohn, 1999; Traudt, 2005)

Effect
E1. The media influence other institutions and are in turn influenced by the political, economic, and all the other social systems that constitute a society" (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986; McQuail, 1984)
E2. Media messages affect and reflect the cultures of society (Littlejohn, 1999)

Relational
R1. The relationship between sender and receiver is asymmetrical, that is, it is one-directional, one-sided and impersonal (Baran & Davis, 2000; Berelson & Steiner, 1964; McQuail, 2005; McQuail & Windahl, 1981; Thompson, 1995)
R2. There is a structured break between production and reception (McQuail, 2005; Thompson, 1995)

Table 2. Screening Definitional Elements

Too General
M4. Messages are commodities
M5. Messages are cultural products consisting of symbolic content, often of great complexity
A6. Audience increasingly fragmented
A8. Audience members engage and give meaning to media contents
1. Media influence other institutions and are in turn influenced by the political, economic, and all the other social systems that constitute a society
E2. Media messages affect and reflect the cultures of society

Too Specific
S3. Senders employ professional communicators; also sell access to other voices
R1. The relationship between sender and receiver is asymmetrical
R2. There is a structured break between production and reception

Faulty
M2. Messages are addressed to no one in particular, their content is open for public oversight
M3. Messages are transient in character
A2. Audiences are heterogeneous individuals
A3. Audiences are anonymous individuals
A7. Audiences are passive recipients of the messages; no opportunity for feedback

Fuzzy
M1. Messages are designed to reach many
A1. Audience is relatively large

Accepted
S1. Sender is complex organization or institution, not an individual
S2. Senders use standardized practices to mass produce the messages and disseminate them
A4. Audience is widely dispersed geographically, that is not all in one place
A5. Audience members are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing
C1. Technological devices are used so that messages can reach audiences within a relatively short time, even simultaneously
C2. Technological devices make messages public, that is available to anyone
C3. Technological devices extend the availability of message in time and space

Table 3. The Synthesized Working Definition of Mass Media

Sender of messages:
* is a complex organization or institution, not an individual
* use standardized practices to mass produce the messages and disseminate them
* have an awareness of specific niche audiences and actively promotes itself in order to attract as many audience members of that niche as possible
* condition audience members for habitual repeated exposures
Audiences members:
* are widely dispersed geographically, that is not all in one place
* are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing
* encounter messages in a variety of exposure states but most often in a state of automaticity
Channels of message dissemination are technological devices that:
* make messages public, that is available to anyone
* extend the availability of messages in time and space
* can reach audiences within a relatively short time, even simultaneously

Copyright and Repositories

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

This license allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the author and the journal. You cannot change it in any way or use it commercially without the written permission of the Author (W.James Potter) and the Journal (Review of Communication Research).

Attribution

You must attribute the work to the Author and mention the Journal with a full citation (it must at least include the data that appears in the suggested citation in the first page of the article), whenever a fragment or the full text of this paper is being copied, distributed or made accessible publicly by any means.

Commercial use

The licensor permits others to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work for non-commercial purposes only, unless you get the written permission of the Author and the Journal.

Modifications of the work

The licensor permits you to copy, distribute, display and perform only unaltered copies of the work. The licensor does not allow you to create and distribute derivative works based on it. The only exception is that you can use parts of the article as a citation.

The above rules are crucial and bound to the general license agreement that you can read at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ and http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/legalcode

Attached is a list of permanent repositories where you can find this article:

Academia.edu @ http://independent.academia.edu/ReviewofCommunicationResearch

Internet Archive @ http://archive.org